

Vayakhel/Pekudei 5778 Sermon

‘If you build it, he will come.’ That phrase has become etched into our shared memories by the film ‘Field of Dreams.’ In that movie, a mysterious voice urges a farmer on the verge of bankruptcy to transform his cornfield into baseball field. As he does, he reconnects to his own past, and to a past shared with others, through a mystical experience of the game of baseball. The structure that he erects, with its base paths, foul poles and bleachers, is an idealized recasting of baseball as a means of personal and communal salvation. At first, he thinks that the ‘he’ who will come is Shoeless Joe Jackson, a baseball great from the early 20th century who had been disgraced in a scandal, but by the end of the movie we understand that the farmer is not meant to redeem Shoeless Joe, but himself and his relationship with his father. The film reaches toward themes of redemption and transcendence.

When we read today’s parshah about the details of the construction of the mishkan, the Tabernacle, I know how many people feel: Bored. This section of the Torah seems far from the literary heights of the stories from Genesis, distant from the inspiration we feel from the description of revelation at Sinai. But what we have to keep uppermost in our minds, to fight off the boredom, is the centrality of this structure, this ‘Tent of Dreams,’ to our ancestors and to us. Just like the farmer in the movie, the Israelites who have left Egypt are just about as down and out as you can get. They are no longer slaves, it is true, but they are wandering and, for the present, landless. They are out of pagan Egypt, but they have only a tentative sense of how to relate to God. They know what they have left behind, but have no sense of what lies ahead. As the episode of the Golden Calf showed last week, it is all too easy for them to slip back into the pagan practices which they would have seen in Egypt during the many years that they were

enslaved there. After the Israelites establish themselves in Canaan, and after the Temple is built, there will be a permanent place in which to worship, but while they are wandering in the wilderness, the Tabernacle will play that role. Like the Field of Dreams, the Tent of Dreams is where the past, present and future all merge. It is a physical space whose function is to overcome time itself as well as the immeasurable distance between humanity and God.

The problem, of course, is how to imagine that the creator of the universe can dwell, or be met, in a physical space that is part of that universe. Can a painter inhabit his painting? Can a writer be a character in his own novel? That is the conundrum that the text is grappling with. If God is to have an intimate relationship with humanity, people who are stuck in these three dimensions, how can God bridge the gap? The solution is a shrine in which worship takes place, where sacrifices are made and incense burned. By describing such a place, God is teaching the Israelites how to establish a connection from the physical world to the realm of God. They will do so by creating a special place within this world in which ultimate concerns are addressed, in which the ultimate relationship is entered into. The Tent of Dreams is where the usual understanding of time and space are undone in order for God to dwell in the world he has created. What we read in this week's parshah is God writing himself into our world.

For their part, the Israelites have to build this thing, and in order to do that they need to know exactly what is required to create a space in which the infinite can dwell, a place that can contain what has no boundaries or limits. And it is not in a light spirit that the animal sacrifices will take place there. The purpose of that slaughter is to breach the wall that separates our realm from God's; it is only the most powerful and frightful thing that can do that: death. The blood of

animal sacrifice was understood to have the power to create a point of contact between this world and God.

The sacrificial system was itself a victim of history. At one time universally used to reach out to the divine, it eventually gave way to prayer, to words, as the primary vehicle of our thoughts and hopes. But the impetus that the ancients felt to build their shrine remains. The motivation, then and now, is to speak to God, to honor God, to petition God for our needs. Those are universal human emotions, ones we are not likely to lose any time soon. And just as they contributed their money and time to build the sacred space in which God's presence was felt, people all over the world continue to do the same, each giving '*N'div libo*,' what their heart moves them to donate. We need houses of worship, and we need to create them together and maintain them together for the good of the entire community.

In 'Field of Dreams,' building the irrational brings practical returns: just before the bank forecloses on the family's farm, hundreds and thousands of people come to the baseball field, for reasons that they would not be able to explain. They come because of something that they shared and that was shared long before their time. In truth, the speech that James Earl Jones gives at the end of the movie explaining all this is more meaningful as a metaphor for religion than for baseball. What is overwhelming about the Field of Dreams, as well as the Tent of Dreams, is the depth of emotion that built it and the yearning of those who will come to it to feel what their predecessors felt, years and decades past. What we want is to recapture feelings that no other place gives us access to, and to pass that experience on to our children. We want to reach out, beyond ourselves, tying past to present to future in a place built for that very purpose. We want to feel transcendence, with a light lunch to follow.

That is all we have ever wanted. Ritual acts in ritual space are a means by which we make that connection. We read ourselves into the Torah's stories and thereby make those stories our own. The same is true of the Tabernacle, which became the Temple, which became and remains the synagogue. We need a physical space, ironically, so that we can transcend it. We are the Israelites' future, just as we are someone else's past in a thousand years. We create spaces like this so that we can at least imagine that God will come into it and into our lives. Let's make sure that it will be here so that those who follow us will be able to do the same.

Shabbat shalom